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Women's representation: 'I only went to conference because it was online'

Maz Gaskell is a rep in the Disclosure and Barring Service, in Liverpool, where she works evening shifts to fit around childcare for her young children.

This year Maz attended group and national PCS conferences for the first time and spoke on a motion at the Home Office conference about part-time working. She says she was only able to go as a delegate because it was online.

"I was more involved with PCS on the learning side, then when the pandemic hit I was still working on site and was dealing more with covid issues in our branch. With everything going online it made it easier for me to attend Zoom meetings and things like that.

And the reason I went to the conference was also because it was online. I couldn't have attended in person because I've got young children so it would have been really difficult. My partner and I both would have had to take time off work for childcare. Also, I like to keep my leave for the kids. It was really interesting to be able to take part.

When it was mentioned at our branch meeting, I initially said I would happily go along as an observer because I've never attended anything like that before. I didn't know what was involved. Going as an observer seemed like a safe option for someone who wasn't sure what to do. Then our vice-chair said the union ran a new delegates course and there was one coming up. So I did that and it was really good because it gave me a real understanding of what actually took place at conference and they explained all the processes.

Then they asked me if I'd like to second a motion at our group conference. I often volunteer for stuff but not usually things that put myself forward like that! I've never been involved in anything active where I have had to stand up and speak.

But everyone was really supportive, particularly the new delegates group. And my branch are brilliant, you can ask any questions; it doesn't matter how daft it seems to me, it makes sense to them because they've been there themselves.

The conference itself was brilliant. It gave me a really good understanding of what actually happens. I didn't realise there was such a democratic process for the workings of the union, deciding on what we are going to fight for this year or discussing the challenges we are going to face. It was amazing to see that and get all the backstory from the previous years, like what people have been fighting on, the successes they've had... it was really, really interesting.

It can feel like everybody knows a lot more than I do, because I'm basically just a mum, I've got work to do at home, I look after my sister's kids in the week and we do a lot of just normal, everyday stuff. This has made me realise that you've just got to join in. Everybody looks after everybody, and it's fine. Nothing's perfect but if you join in, if you just go and have a look, there's no need to be worried that you won't be welcomed or you won't know what to do.

I'm going to try and go to conference from now on and actually physically attend next year. If it was offered as a hybrid in-person and online event, in future I could go between the two. There would be no reason to miss one."